The Baptism of Jesus Christ
(Article)

Introduction:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, He saw the heavens breaking open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.”
Mark 1:9–11 (BSB)

The baptism of Jesus Christ is among the most important events in the Gospels. It is mentioned in different ways in all four Gospels, providing unique details. This event is also linked to John the Baptist, a relative of Jesus.

In the New Testament, we find two kinds of baptism, namely, that performed by John the Baptist, and the baptism related to Jesus, His disciples and the Apostle Paul (John 3:22-26; Acts 2:38-41; 1 Corinthians 1:14-17) - both water rituals are derived from Jewish purification rites (Leviticus 14:6-16; 15:5-27; Numbers 19:7-22) and yet, as we are to find out, uniquely different. (1)

The following is an exploration of Jesus’ baptism and its meaning for Christians. There are two parts. In the first part, we are considering truths about John the Baptist (the beginning of his ministry, his message, his view of Jesus and his courage). In the second part, we are looking at the baptism of Christ, as it is revealed in all four gospels (Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-23 and John 1:29-34). Both parts are developed in the form of a commentary, pointing out significant verses, their meaning, their interrelationship and theology.

Truths About John the Baptist

John’s Ministry Begins:

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”
Matthew 3:1–2 (BSB)

In this part we are taking a closer look at Jesus’ predecessor, John the Baptist, whose ministry is recorded in all four Gospels. The beginning of his ministry (Matthew 3:1-2; Mark 1:1-4; Luke 3:1-2 and John 1:19-28) follows the angelic announcement to his Father, Zechariah (Luke 1:8-20) revealing God’s divine plan of redemption, as John the Baptist is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6) coming in the spirit of the prophet Elijah (Luke 1:17) - John’s message is a call to repentance as Jesus Christ is about to begin His ministry: “prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him,” (Matthew 3:1-3; Mark 1:2-4; Luke 3:3-6). (2)

The beginning of John’s ministry is well-grounded in history as described in Luke:

> In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.
>
> Luke 3:1–2 (BSB)

Commentary:

In this Bible passage we see the precise dating of the beginning for John’s ministry (v.1). Along with this, we find real people and historical events mentioned here, including the Roman emperor Tiberius Caesar (reigning from AD 14 to 37), Pontius Pilate - governor of Judea (reigning from AD 26-36), three tetrarchs and two high priests, Annas and Caiaphas (v.2). What matters here is the unequaled precision of dates and people in the New Testament, which means that the promise of salvation is firmly grounded in world history. This promise upholds them as we learn here, that “…the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (v.2) and both John

and later Jesus appear before Herod, as well as Jesus appearing before Caiaphas, Annas and Pilate. (3)

And this was John’s testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, “Who are you?” He did not refuse to confess, but openly declared, “I am not the Christ.” “Then who are you?” they inquired. “Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” So they said to him, “Who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet: “I am a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’ ” Then the Pharisees who had been sent asked him, “Why then do you baptize, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands One you do not know. He is the One who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” All this happened at Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.
John 1:19–28 (BSB)

Commentary:

Complimenting Luke’s detailed account of John the Baptist beginning his ministry (Luke 3:1-2) is the testimony we have in the above passage recorded in the Gospel of John. In the Baptist’s testimony - who is responding to Jewish leaders from Jerusalem (“priests and Levites”) (v.19) - we learn more about his relation to Jesus Christ, the expected Messiah and other expected people. (4) As John answers the Jewish leaders - note, that not all of those leaders opposed Jesus later on, such as Nicodemus (John 3:1-15; 7:50) and Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38-42 - we understand that he is a forerunner to our Lord (v.23). (5) The fact that the Baptist’s ministry was making an impact, can be seen in the appearance of Levites here (v.19) who are hardly ever mentioned in the New Testament, and are generally associated with temple rituals, but also were teachers (2 Chronicles 35:3; Nehemiah 8:7-8). (6)

The testimony of John the Baptist is then directly linked to Jesus Christ, without mentioning His name (v.26-27). The messengers neither know who John the Baptist is, nor why he is baptizing in the wilderness (v.19), and they certainly do not know Jesus who is standing right there with them (v.26). And

yet, John points them back to God’s Word indirectly, by identifying himself with the words of the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:1-5). (7) Again, like Luke, we have a specific location provided here (‘Bethany’ in v.28) grounding this encounter in factual history, as God’s messenger prepares the way for the Messiah.

John the Baptist - The Man and His Message

…and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.’ ” John wore a garment of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region around the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his place of baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit, then, in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe lies ready at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me will come One more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”
Matthew 3:2–12 (BSB)

Commentary:

In this passage we find out more about John the Baptist and his message (also recorded in Mark 1:2-8; Luke 3:3-14; John 1:20-23). Right in the second verse, we see his message expressed: “Repent, for the kingdom

of heaven is near," in which he is preaching a message of repentance and judgment. (8) This becomes more clear when John speaks out against some of the Pharisees and Sadducees at his place of baptism (v.7-10). John speaks to them about Jesus, who he does not mention by name, but refers to eternal judgment of unrepentant people, the burning up of chaff "with unquenchable fire," which clearly distinguishes the ministries of John and Jesus. (9)

He went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him. Every valley shall be filled in, and every mountain and hill made low. The crooked ways shall be made straight, and the rough ways smooth. And all humanity will see God's salvation.' " Then John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit, then, in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe lies ready at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" John replied, "Whoever has two tunics should share with him who has none, and whoever has food should do the same." Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Collect no more than you are authorized," he answered. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" "Do not take money by force or false accusation," he said. "Be content with your wages."
Luke 3:3–14 (BSB)

Commentary:

Here, we have additional details about the Baptist's message (also in Mark 1:2-8) and realize that his preaching and call to repentance is linked to the "forgiveness of sins" (v.3) as a result of God responding to truly repentant hearts. (10) John's message here includes practical ethical admonitions to different groups of people (crowds in v.10, tax collectors in v.12, and soldiers in v.14) (11).

He did not refuse to confess, but openly declared, "I am not the Christ." "Then who are you?" they inquired. "Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet: "I am a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' "
John 1:20–23 (BSB)

Commentary:

This passage concludes what we learn about John the Baptist - his person and message. The explicit Old Testament quotation here (v.22) highlights his status and simultaneously points to Jesus Christ as the Messiah. (12) These foregoing three denials in response to the questions of the priests and Levites (v.19-21) show his truthfulness and witness to the gospel. His first denial, not being the Christ, confirms that he is not the Christ, the expected Messiah - His second denial, not being Elijah is appropriate in that he denies that he literally is the returning prophet Elijah, and yet an element of mystery remains here, since Jesus later states that John "was Elijah" (Matthew 11:14; 17:12; Mark 9:13). (13) The third denial, relating to the so-called 'Prophet,' as predicted by Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18 and see also Acts 3:22; 7:37) reveals John's personality to us in that there is an uprightness here (something like 'No means No'). (14)

What matters most here, is that we have a well-rounded picture of John the Baptist, that is as man and his message. His activity in the 'wilderness,' that is, uninhabited and uncultivated territory points back to Israel's history, as recorded in the Old Testament (God's deliverance of Israel out of Egypt and God's covenant at Mt. Sinai) - coupled with his baptism as an appeal for Israel to repent, we witness a different baptism than the one Jesus stands for. (15) The factuality of John the Baptist, coming and preaching as a real person is attested to in extrabiblical writings by Josephus (Ant. 18.5.2/11-17) where a brief description of John's ministry is provided. (16)

John the Baptist’s Picture of Jesus

Now John was also baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because the water was plentiful there, and people kept coming to be baptized. (For John had not yet been thrown into prison.) Then a dispute arose between John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the issue of ceremonial washing. So John’s disciples came to him and said, “Look, Rabbi, the One who was with you beyond the Jordan, the One you testified about—He is baptizing, and everyone is going to Him.” John replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but am sent ahead of Him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom stands and listens for him, and is overjoyed to hear the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must increase; I must decrease.
John 3:23–30 (BSB)

Commentary:

As the coming of God’s Kingdom through Jesus Christ begins, John the Baptist’s preaching comes to a close, since he belongs to a past era. (17) Here we are looking at John the Baptist and his view of Jesus, which is also recorded from different perspectives in Matthew 3:11-12; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:15-18 and John 1:24-27.

In this text we find a more pronounced testimony of John the Baptist about Jesus, since he is dealing with a dispute apparently over “ceremonial washing” (v.25) leading John’s disciples to questions, since Jesus’ disciples (but not Jesus Himself seen in John 4:2) are baptizing people (v.26). It is in John’s response to his own disciples that we see his view of Jesus and his own relationship to Jesus well expressed (v.27-30).

The proverb John the Baptist uses (v.27) shows that he acknowledges God’s sovereign role in assigning particular missional tasks as part of His redemptive plan. (18) The parable in v.29 illustrates John the Baptist’s understanding of his God-given role (as “friend of the bridegroom”) and Jesus’ superior role (as “bridegroom”), since only Jesus (Revelation 21:9) is king of Israel and Messiah (Isaiah 62:4-5; Jeremiah 2:2; Hosea 2:16-20) - all of this culminates in John’s testimony acknowledging the supremacy of Jesus Christ (v.30). (19)

The Courage of John the Baptist

But when he rebuked Herod the tetrarch regarding his brother's wife Herodias and all the evils he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.
Luke 3:19–20 (BSB)

Commentary:

As the ministry of John the Baptist comes to a close, we must acknowledge his courage. This can be seen in the above passage, when John rebukes 'Herod the tetrarch' (Herod Antipas) for his unlawful marriage "and all the evils he had done," (v.19) resulting in the imprisonment of John (v.20).

This event is more fully recorded in Matthew 14:4-12 and details the gruesome execution of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas. However, before John is murdered, Jesus reassures him that Christ is the Messiah, and he should remain firm in his belief in Jesus (Luke 11:1-6). Notably, the imprisonment of John the Baptist at a fortress built by Herod (confirmed through archeological excavation) is recorded in the extrabiblical writings of Josephus (Jewish Antiquities 18.116-119) which authenticates both the life and ministry of John the Baptist. (20)

The Baptism of Jesus Christ

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, He saw the heavens breaking open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased."
Mark 1:9–11 (BSB)

Having investigated the truths about Jesus' predecessor, John the Baptist, we now turn to the event (prior to the Baptist's execution) of the baptism of Jesus Christ, which is recorded in all four Gospels (Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-23 and John 1:29-34).

Commentary:

In the above passage (Mark 1:9-11) we have a compact summary of Jesus' baptism. Here we find three specific events, which signify God's inauguration of His kingdom in eschatological Jewish tradition: the opening of heaven (v.10), the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus (v.10) and a voice from heaven speaking to Jesus (v.11). (21) The "heavens breaking open" (v.10) points to a cosmic event linked to the death of Jesus and later on the temple curtain torn (Mark 15:37-38) prior to His resurrection. (22) The divine nature of Jesus' baptism is emphasized by the Spirit's descending, combined with the assurance by God's own voice that Jesus truly is God's Son. (23) After centuries of God 'being silent,' the voice from heaven reaffirms that divine revelation has now resumed. (24)

At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" *"Let it be so now,"* Jesus replied. *"It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness in this way."* Then John permitted Him. As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. Suddenly the heavens were opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and resting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!"
Matthew 3:13–17 (BSB)

Commentary:

The baptism of Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 3:13-17, raises some interesting questions. Right at the start we realize that John the Baptist tries to prevent Jesus from being baptized (v.14). Why did Jesus insist on being baptized (v.15)? Part of this answer is, that even though Jesus was sinless (conceived by the Holy Spirit and born without sin), He identifies with fallen sinful mankind (see 2 Corinthians 5:21) and also identifies with John's ministry, as a response to John calling for repentance. (25)

The other part to this answer is that Jesus, because of His identification with the Israelite people, had to submit to God's requirements to fulfill the law, as part of His role as Messiah, to those "known under law" (Galatians

4:4) - in other words, His baptism is a proclamation that Jesus takes the place of all repentant sinners, to remove them from God's penal judgment ("to fulfill all righteousness in this way" in v.15). (26)

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as He was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in a bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." Jesus Himself was about thirty years old when He began His ministry. He was regarded as the son of Joseph, the son of Heli… Luke 3:21–23 (BSB)

Commentary:

Turning to the record of Christ's baptism in the Gospel of Luke, we have unique details not found in the other Gospels. As such, we find out that Jesus is "praying," (v.21) which indicates a divine relationship between Jesus Christ and God-the Father - hereby, as Christians, Jesus becomes our model to follow as we surrender to God for direction and guidance in our prayer lives. (27)

We learn about Jesus' age ("about thirty years old" in v.23), as he begins His ministry following the baptism, adding a historical fact, (28) which is then combined with His genealogy (Luke 3:23-38). The affirmation of Christ by God's voice (v.22) reveals Jesus' divine title, as "Son," which occurs again at Christ's transfiguration (Matthew 9:1-13, Luke 9:28-36) indicating Jesus' unique relationship to God. (29)

Lastly, as in the other Gospel accounts, we find here the theological revelation of the Trinity (God-the Father, manifested in the voice; God-the Son, that is Jesus Christ; and God-the Holy Spirit, manifested in a form like a dove). What matters here is that at Christ's baptism the manifestation of the Trinity, emphasizes the uniqueness of this divine event. Jesus Christ is identified as Spirit-bearer, who in turn, becomes the Spirit-baptizer (John 1:32-33) replacing John the Baptist's ministry with His own. (30)

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.’ I myself did not know Him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that He might be revealed to Israel.” Then John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and resting on Him. I myself did not know Him, but the One who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is He who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”
John 1:29–34 (BSB)

Commentary:

Having been baptized, Jesus is mentioned again here in the Gospel of John, providing additional details about the meaning and purpose of Christ’s baptism - here - as John the Baptist (prior to his imprisonment and execution) gives an important testimony.

John the Baptist explains the reason for his own mission of baptizing (v.31), followed by his testimony that God Himself had prepared a pre-arranged sign for John that would help him identify Jesus Christ as Messiah (v.32-33). This provides the basis for the Baptist’s testimony, and helps us as Christians embrace this testimony for ourselves, that Jesus is indeed the “son of God,” (v.34), thereby, revealing the unique work of the Holy Spirit, as we can see in the Old Testament, in the first verses of Genesis (Genesis 1:1-2) where the “Spirit of God” is mentioned. (31)

Also, when John testifies about Jesus as “the Lamb of God” (v.29) we understand that Jesus himself becomes the atoning ‘lamb’ for the sins of all believers in Christ. (32) With both Jesus and John the Baptist fulfilling God’s divine plan of redemption, John testifying about Jesus’ surpassing greatness, “because He was before me,” (v.30) points to Christ’s incarnation, since Jesus was born *after* John the Baptist.

Finally, this passage points to the ongoing use of baptism in the Christian community (without the Bible specifying the exact details). *Repentance* is key here, as we consider Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, where Christ says:

> Jesus answered, ***“Truly, truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh is born of flesh, but spirit is born of the Spirit. Do not be amazed that I said, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes. You hear its***

sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

John 3:5–8 (BSB)

This is where John the Baptist's baptism (a call to repentance) and Jesus' baptism interlock, since Christ's baptism is the ('unspecified') pattern for Christian baptism. (34) Thus, the trinitarian formula in later church history, is derived from the baptismal formula Jesus provides, after His resurrection, at the 'Great Commission' (Matthew 28:19). (35)

Conclusion:

Then Jesus came to them and said, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*
Matthew 28:18–20 (BSB)

In sum, we have seen that the baptism of Jesus Christ as revealed to us in Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-23 and John 1:24-34, is a unique factual event in history, in which Jesus identifies with those people He came to save - His Heavenly Father blesses Him and verifies through the Holy Spirit that Jesus is the Messiah. (36)

First, we see in the life and person of John the Baptist and in his evangelism (as he refers to Isaiah 40:3) a call to repent along with the promise of restoration and forgiveness. (37) Furthermore, we realize John's specific position in God's plan of redemption, since he is the last of Old Testament prophets, and occupies a unique place as God's messenger, since he comes in the spirit of Elijah (Malachi 3:1; 4:5; Luke 1:17; Matthew 11:9-10, 14). (38) Also, the Baptist is not only a godly man full of courage (suffering for God's kingdom to the point of execution), but also is an important eyewitness at *and* after Jesus' baptism (John 1:29-34), affirming Jesus Christ as Messiah.

Second, we recognize that - as the ministry of John the Baptist comes to a close - Jesus' baptism reveals His identity and mission. At this event, God's voice from heaven affirms Jesus' divine sonship, and the Holy Spirit

descending upon Him confirms Jesus as the Christ (‘Anointed One’). (39) The manifestation of the Trinity here (God-the Father, God-the Son, that is Jesus Christ and God-the Holy Spirit) - later reiterated by Jesus after His resurrection, at the ‘Great Commission’ in Matthew 28:18-20 - points to Christ’s commissioning in the years to follow as, itinerant healer, preacher and teacher. (40)

Third, the endorsement and confirmation of Jesus as Messiah (‘the Coming One’) at His baptism (41) is effectively a call to repentance. As Jesus’ ministry begins along with His main objective of preaching the good news, repentance means to believe in Jesus as essential aspect of following Him (Mark 1:17). (42) Baptism, *without* a repentant heart, does not accomplish salvation:

> And this water symbolizes the baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
>
> 1 Peter 3:21 (BSB)

The mode of baptism (sprinkling, immersion, etc.) is *not* decisive either, since Jesus never explains *what the ritual itself means* (the Apostle Paul provides a more fuller explanation in Romans 6:1-14 and 2 Corinthians 5:17). (43)

What matters most is that - with the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (44) - anybody is welcome to come to Jesus with a truly repentant heart, so Christian baptism is a sign of initiation directed at a relationship with Christ. (45) This background helps us understand God’s call to repent and how it relates to baptism, as we do well to heed the Apostle Peter’s words in the Bible:

> Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise belongs to you and your children and to all who are far off—to all whom the Lord our God will call to Himself.”
>
> Acts 2:38–39 (BSB)

Salvation is available only through faith in Jesus Christ as personal savior. Amen.

Key Terms

Annas -

Baptism -

Caiaphas -

Exodus -

Herod Antipas (Luke 3:1-2)

High Priesthood -

Holy Spirit -

Lamb of God -

Messiah -

Pharisees -

Pilate -

Repentance -

Salvation -

Tetrarchs -

Tiberius Caesar -

Trinity -

Notes

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May God bless you and keep you.

Pastor John

Amen.